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SUBJECT: SANAKOYEV'S HOPES AND FEARS FOR SOUTH OSSETIA

Classified By: Ambassador John F. Tefft for reasons 1.4(b&d).

Summary

1. (C) Dmitry Sanakoyev outlined for Washington and Embassy representatives April 21 his achievements in his first year as leader of the Georgian-recognized Temporary Administrative Unit of South Ossetia, and laid out his vision for a future in which young men in the region have other opportunities besides a career carrying a gun. Sanakoyev expressed great concern that Russian President Putin's recent decision to expand ties with Georgia's separatist regions might mean new Russian customs posts and economic unification with the separatist-controlled part of South Ossetia. This would resemble "true annexation" by Russia, Sanakoyev said, and would isolate the areas he controls. He called on the international community to support Georgia's opposition to Russia's steps, and called on Georgia to move ahead with plans to define precisely what South Ossetian autonomy would mean. End Summary.

Successes and Challenges

2. (C) Sanakoyev began the meeting in his Kurta headquarters by outlining for EUR/CARC Conflict Resolution Advisor Michael Carpenter and Poloff his own transformation from someone who had fought the Georgians and served in the de facto administration into someone who believed that autonomy within Georgia was the only way to secure a better, more democratic future for South Ossetia. Sanakoyev said that since the election of Eduard Kokoity as de facto president in 2001, the separatist leadership had intentionally stoked ethnic hatred, and the Russians had brought in large amounts of money and arms in order to use South Ossetia for their own purposes of opposing NATO. Sanakoyev, who won unofficial elections in November 2006 and then received official Georgian sanction in May 2007, said he had already overseen considerable improvements in his region's infrastructure, including natural gas networks, roads, heating of schools, an electricity network delinked from Russia, sports facilities, and economic development projects. He stressed that Kokoity had responded by blocking the road connecting Sanakoyev's area with the separatist-controlled area, and had arrested multiple people inside the separatist region who supported Sanakoyev's work. While the Georgian government had set up a state commission to define South Ossetia's autonomy, Sanakoyev noted, Kokoity had forbidden anyone in his area from taking part. Sanakoyev identified one of his main challenges as communicating his vision of an autonomous and democratic South Ossetia to the closed society in Tskhinvali.

Russia's Dangerous Game

3. (C) Sanakoyev said it appeared to him that Russia was using the pretext of Kosovo independence to "legalize its policies" in the separatist regions, as reflected in Putin's

April 16 instructions to the Russian government. Sanakoyev said it was his "personal opinion" that, aside from the United States, the West had failed to speak strongly against these Russian actions and had left Georgia "unprotected." Carpenter noted there had been some recent European statements critical of the Russian decree, but Sanakoyev reiterated his view that Russia and Kokoity had largely been given "carte blanche" to change the status quo to their advantage. He noted that Russia's policy was to divide the U.S. and the Europeans, knowing that in such circumstances it could act with impunity. Sanakoyev said he was particularly concerned that Russia would increase its already considerable economic support to the Tskhinvali regime. In the short run, he said, the greatest dangers were that Russia would establish customs posts in the separatist region and would integrate the region into the Russian banking system. These steps would create huge hardships for the population in his area, Sanakoyev said, and drive the separatist-controlled villages even further into the Russian orbit.

Pressure Increasing in the Separatist Region

14. (C) Sanakoyev said a spate of bombings in the separatist area in the last few months served Russian and separatist purposes by making the region look more unstable in the eyes of internationals and by increasing fear in the population as a justification for tougher measures internally. Sanakoyev said power struggles inside the separatist region were hard to predict, but he thought numerous recent arrests there -- some for corruption and others for alleged support of Sanakoyev -- would increase discontent and could possibly lead to further "terrorist actions." Sanakoyev said Kokoity's regime was entirely dependent on Russian patronage and its internal support was limited to pensioners and young people who had grown up after the early 1990s conflict.

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These young people, Sanakoyev said sadly, knew only the profession of the soldier; firing a rifle had become a central part of their psychology. Sanakoyev said his own vision was a South Ossetia tied into the Georgian economy in order to create other opportunities for people. For this to happen, he noted, there would have to be a customs regime at the Roki Tunnel border crossing with Russia and a change in the separatist regime's insistence on blocking connections with the Georgians.

Comment

15. (C) With Georgian financial support, the Temporary Administrative Unit has managed to make considerable improvements in the area it controls. One example is the steep bypass road through Eredvi, which we took to Kurta. It is still unpaved, but it has been considerably improved since last year, and has been partially re-routed so that it no longer runs past the Russian peacekeeping post "Pauk." This road is especially important because it is the region's only lifeline as long as the de facto authorities continue to block the highway that runs through Tskhinvali. But despite this and other accomplishments, Sanakoyev's mood was not especially optimistic; he was clearly worried about what steps the Russians would take in South Ossetia to implement Putin's new instructions, and he was dismayed that the West (Europe especially) had not spoken out against these instructions more strongly. At the same time -- in a remark seemingly aimed at the Georgian officials present in the meeting as well as at us -- he noted the Georgians should move ahead with the work of the state commission to define South Ossetia's autonomous status. Sanakoyev seemed to understand what some Georgian officials may not intuitively grasp: that to reintegrate the separatist regions, Georgia will have to communicate its vision of autonomous democratic and economic development directly to the local population.

TEFFT